DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 375 240 UD 030 144

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TITLE Halting Dropouts: To Be or Not To Be, There Can Be No Question!
PUB DATE 94
NOTE 19p.; For an earlier version of this paper, see ED 277 127.
PUB TYPE Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Adolescents; Adults; *College School Cooperation; *Community Programs; *Cultural Differences; Demography; Dropout Research; *Dropouts; *Early Intervention; Elementary Secondary Education; Higher Education; Juvenile Gangs; Literacy; *Minority Groups; Models; Program Descriptions; Skill Development; Theory Practice Relationship; Training; Youth Programs
IDENTIFIERS California (San Bernardino); *California State University San Bernardino

ABSTRACT

This article explores the dropout problem at national, regional, and local levels. The demographics of dropouts are examined with particular emphasis on cultural variables and the plight of minorities. The need for community-based education is explored, and a model that has proved successful is outlined for dropout prevention, intervention, and recovery. Early-intervention efforts that have been successful are exemplified by some programs of the Provisional Accelerated Learning (PAL) Center in San Bernardino (California). At the Center, students from California State University, San Bernardino, take classroom theory and put it into practice in a community-based setting. Successful programs include: an alternative street academy for educational and computer literacy training; (2) Project Early Outreach for Saturday tutoring for elementary school students; (3) Operation RETAIN for youth from 14 to 21 years; (4) Teens for Responsible Behavior, a pregnancy-prevention and parenting-responsibility program; (5) Project Earn and Learn, a work-experience program; (6) RETAIN II, a business-skills development program for eligible 16 to 45 year old participants; (7) Operation Reclaim; an adult-education program; (8) Operation Read/Project Citizen, an adult-literacy program (9) a substance-abuse and gang-intervention program; (10) Self-Destruct, and anti-gang and anti-drug video and Mighty Medic, the anti-drug comic book featuring a black superhero and (11) pre-employment training. The PAL Center illustrates the difference collaborative efforts can make in fighting the dropout problem. (Contains 5 references.) (Author/SLD)

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HALTING DROPOUTS:

To Be or Not To Be, There Can Be No Question !

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the dropout problem at the national, regional and local levels. The demographics of dropouts are examined, with particular emphasis on cultural variables and the plight of minorities. The writer discusses the need for community-based education and details a successful model for dropout prevention, intervention and recovery.

HALTING DROPOUTS:

To Be or Not To Be, There Is No Question !

The magnitude of the high school dropout problems is well documented. Kagan (1990) stated, "We now have several decades of demographic and correlational studies that document a clear profile for students at risk."

In 1994 the dropout problem still plagues our society. Numerous researchers have published studies, formulated models, and identified problems. Effective solutions, however, have not been as prolific.

Minorities are over-represented and funding for solutions is underrepresented. Census Bureau figures indicate 85% of the Hispanics and 75% of the African-Americans reside in metropolitan areas where the highest dropout and crime rates occur.

It is important to note that while the government spends approximately $2,500 in Average Daily Attendance costs, it spends upwards of $28,000 to keep an individual incarcerated.

Statistics that show dropouts comprise 80% of the prison population should be cause for great concern. This is especially pertinent when a report by the National Center on Institutions and Alternatives, reported 33.2% of African-American males in

California, between the ages 20 and 29, are in jail, in prison, in a juvenile correctional facility, or on parole or probation. This compared with 5.4% of White males and 9.4% of Hispanic males in the same age category. Coupled with the fact that African-Americans only comprised 7.5% of California's population, one can discern the disturbing implication that a generation of African-American males may be lost if the dropout tide is not halted.

The Dropout Problem in California

Researchers offer many reasons and solutions for the troublesome dropout rate. Richardson et al. (1989) suggested that the typing of students by resource personnel, i.e., psychologists, counselors and other school specialists, tremendously affects teacher's perceptions, which, in turn, impacts teacher behaviors toward students. Larkin and Chabay (1989) suggested using motivating factors to increase cognitive skills. Peer action, and the use of "informal" student knowledge to foster critical thought, was posited by Resnick and Klopfer (1989).

Student Attrition

Ambiguity exists relative to student attrition versus student dropout. Student attrition figures are easier to compile and form the basis for much dropout data. The Richmond California Unified School District defines attrition as students who enrolled in a

school and for some reason left the school before the completion of the school year.

Thus, a student included in attrition data, not verified as enrolled in another school or program, becomes a dropout. Methods of data compilation differ between reporting agencies yielding very significant data discrepancies.

According to a San Bernardino City Unified School District dropout study released in 1990, 29% of the original 10th grade students had dropped out before graduation. California State Department of Education figures for the same group of 10th graders revealed a number in excess of 40%.

The Plight of Minorities

California's school-age population is becoming minority faster than the general population. This is due to higher birth rates among minorities and immigration into California of young minority families. The local Fontana Unified School District, in 1990, for the first time in the 35 year history of the district, showed a Latino majority of the 27,043 enrolled students. They outnumbered White students 46.6% to 41.4% (Monteagudo, 1990).

The attrition rate for minorities is disproportionately high and has caused much concern in institutions of higher education.

Relatively few minorities enroll in college and universities and even fewer remain to graduate.

Possible factors cited by researchers that impact the high dropout rate: incomplete and inadequate academic preparation, language problems, the environment of inner city schools which most Blacks and Hispanics attend, teacher inability to understand and deal with cultural differences, and economic hardships are among the reasons most frequently given.

A "District Dropout Report" released September 1, 1992 by the San Bernardino City Unified School District (SBCUSD), revealed that American Indian, Hispanic, and African American students were all disproportionately overrepresented in the dropout population. Additionally, the district-reported dropout rates were in stark contrast to the rates reported by the California Department of Education (CDE). The SBCUSD three-year longitudinal study of the June 1991 graduating class revealed a 14.2% dropout rate compared to the CDE reported rate of 26.9%. Statistics also show that minorities are also frequently disproportionately expelled from school.

Dropouts and the Juvenile Justice System

The disproportionately numbers of minority dropouts and expulsions positively correlates with the disproportionate numbers

of minorities in the prison system. According to a December 8, 1993 document from the California Office of Criminal Justice Planning, the National Council on Crime and Delinquency (NCCD) found that

> -African-American (AA) youth were significantly overrepresented at all stages of juvenile justice processing in California.
>
> -Two out of five AA youth have come in contact with the California juvenile justice system.
>
> -AA youth account for 42% of State's incarcerated juvenile populations, although they comprise less than 9% of the State's youth population.
>
> -AA youth are 10 times more likely to be sentenced to the California Youth Authority than other youth.
>
> -Over 44% of AA youth between the ages of 10-15 were detained by court dispositions compared to 28% of the majority youth.
>
> -53% of AA youth between the ages of 16-17 were detained by court dispositions. Only 32% of the majority youth in the same age group were detained.
>
> -AA youth have higher detention rates, higher sentencing rates, the strongest residual effect, and experience disparate processing in the juvenile justice system, according to the NCCD report.

Research shows that statewide, 53.4% of high school graduates enroll in college; whereas, only 10.1% of African Americans, and 15.3% of Hispanics are even ELIGIBLE to enroll in college.

Only 2.4% of African Americans, and 2.9% of Hispanics <u>actually enroll</u> in college.

Culture and Teacher Perceptions

As an instructor of cross-cultural counseling, I perceived cultural variables to be vital in student attrition, in the formation of student self-esteem, and positive teacher interaction. Subsequently, I designed and administered the Teacher Opinion Survey (TOS) to San Bernardino City elementary school teachers.

The city elementary schools have a 56% minority student population. Questionnaires were disseminated to 275 teachers in eleven elementary schools with large minority enrollments. Teachers were queried on their attitudes about career preparedness, cultural factors, and knowledge of diverse ethnic and cultural values. Although the survey was conducted during the last month of school, the educators' interests were high as indicated by the 33% return rate.

Analysis of the data revealed that although 60% of the students were Black and Hispanic, 72% of the teachers were Caucasian; 17% knew "very few" of their students' parents; and 37% reported no cultural awareness workshops attended during the last 3 years. Forty-three percent (43%) were dissatisfied with their preparedness for working with the culturally diverse student population; however, interestingly, only 20% felt workshops would be beneficial. Next to "paperwork", the thing LEAST liked about their teaching assignment was "problem students." Responding to an

inquiry about increasing parental involvement, one teacher wrote, "tie in there AFDC requirements, usually predominately middle class parents are involved." (sic)

Research studies have shown the critical importance of cultural variable in the retention or loss of minority students. Most institutions of higher learning require at least one class in multi-cultural training. We find, however, that "theoretical" training in the classroom is insufficient to adequately prepare counselors for the reality of effectively interacting with the majority of minority students.

Researcher to Practitioner

With a belief that one person CAN make a difference, in December 1984, the writer formed a non-profit 501-3(c) corporation, Provisional Educational Services, Incorporated. We wrote and sought funding for two dropout prevention proposals: "Operation RETAIN" (Rescue Educational Training and Initiative Now), for secondary students, and "Project Early Outreach" for elementary students.

A facility was secured on the Westside of San Bernardino, an area comprised of 94% African-Americans and Mexican-Americans. Forty-three percent of the households within the area reported incomes below the poverty level, and youth unemployment ran as high

as 62%. Volunteers washed and repaired windows, walls, and floors; painted the entire facility; and improved the grounds.

Part of the impetus for opening the PAL Center was a San Bernardino City Unified School District report which stated that 48.2% of the high school students were receiving less-than-C averages, and/or failing in at least one course. Another significant factor was the largest number of students leaving school were suspended or expelled for behavioral infractions. These students are prime dropout candidates.

University to Community

California State University at San Bernardino's School of Education scheduled its 1992 Summer and Fall Multicultural Counseling class at the Provisional Accelerated Learning (PAL) Center - a community-based organization. University students received first-hand experience counseling, tutoring, and motivating multicultural youth in a 94% minority neighborhood. University students moved theories from the classroom to practical application in a community-based setting.

Sensitivity and motivation are key elements of the learning process at the PAL Center, which has a variety of programs for in-school and out-of-school individuals of all ages. The staff is

culturally relevant, sensitive, provide individualized attention, and dwell on the strengths of each individual participant.

EARLY INTERVENTION STRATEGIES

Educators feel that students' habits, interests, and attitudes toward schooling are formed in elementary school. By the middle-school years, many students have developed - or not developed - the reading and computational skills, study habits, and self assurance needed to adjust to the demands of junior high school. Often the size and complexity of junior high school is confusing and intimidating.

Many San Bernardino County students are prime dropout candidates. On the California Learning Assessment Test in reading, math and writing, they scored at or below 4th, 8th, and 10th grade students in Orange, San Diego, Riverside and Los Angeles Counties. The lone exception was 10th grade writers in Los Angeles County.

PAL Center Successes

The PAL Center's success rate with early intervention has been phenomenal. "Project Early Outreach", funded by the San Bernardino City Council to provide tutoring, counseling, and enhancement support to 60 elementary students for six months, drew 134 applicants. Pre and Post California Test of Basic Skills (CTBS)

scores were evaluated. Because of time constraints, three basic skills tests were administered in one sitting. Nevertheless, students showed remarkable growth. Sixty-nine percent (69%) of the students tested showed significant growth in reading; 69% significantly improved in Language; and 50% improved in Mathematics, which was the last test administered. All students, who attended more than one week, showed growth in at least one skill area. Most improved in all three academic disciplines. During oral interviews by an outside evaluator, 100% of the students said the PAL Center had helped them for "regular school", in addition, parents' comments were noteworthy:

> "You have been able to stimulate _____ in a way that public school has not ... thank you, thank you, thank you. With educators like yourselves and parents who care, the future holds incredible promise for our children." L.J. "...She hated school and wanted to be a second grade dropout. Her attitude toward school was very negative. Since the PAL Center has worked with her on a one-on-one basis, she has realized that learning can be knowledgeable and fun."

Attacking the Problem

Several dropout-prevention, intervention, and recovery programs have been implemented at the PAL Center.

Alternative Street Academy provided educational and computer literacy training to suspended and expulsion-revoked students until their return to school district campuses. The semi-independent study format provided 10 hours of in-class instruction, and 10 hours of outside assignments. Youth, who would ordinarily be "on the streets", were actively engaged in teacher and computer-assisted learning. Enrollees increased their reading and math scores by one to four grade levels on the Wide Range Achievement Test (WRAT). Eighty-nine percent of the participants were male, 80% were minority, and the enrollees had a 90% attendance rate.

Project Early Outreach provided Saturday morning tutorial services for elementary school children. Originally funded by the City of San Bernardino for 60 children, 96 were enrolled and a waiting list of 38 was established. With subsequent funding from McDonnell Douglas, 23 enrolled students attended each week and a waiting list was again established.

Operation RETAIN (Rescue Educational Training and Initiative Now) provided individualized academic tutoring, computer training, counseling, GED preparation, English-as-a-Second Language (ESL), and employment skill training for youth aged 14 to 21-years-old. Funded by the San Bernardino County Private Industry Council (PIC), this program has served over 900 youth in its seven years of operation. In 1989, although originally contracted for 100 youth,

191 were enrolled before premature cessation of enrollment due to lack of funding. Enrollment was also stopped two months early during 1990 for this culturally diverse population.

A March 1991 enrollment of 89 participants included 14 Caucasians, 15 African-Americans, 30 Hispanic, 6 Vietnamese, 2 Chinese and 22 Asian and Pacific Islanders. A large number of enrollees were from Job Corp and probation group homes.

In 1993-94, of 97 enrolled, 44 were placed in permanent employment.

Teens for Responsible Behavior, a program for male and female teenagers, coordinate by a male, stressed pregnancy prevention and parenting responsibilities.

Project Earn and Learn hired 165 youth, in Summer 1994, and placed them in interest and skill-related jobs. Funded by the San Bernardino County PIC, and Department of Jobs and Employment Services, 14 to 21-year-olds worked on jobs Tuesday through Thursday and rotated through classes at California State University on Monday.

RETAIN II, funded by the California State Department of Education, offered free computer word-processing, data-entry, GED

preparation and academic remediation to eligible 16 to 45 year-old participants.

Operation Reclaim, a Greater Avenues to Independence (GAIN) welfare reform program, provided adult basic education, GED preparation, and computer skill training to eighty-two (82) 16 to 45-year-old recipients of Aid for Families with Dependent Children (AFDC).

Operation Read/Project Citizen, an adult literacy program, including amnesty training, provided basic remediation to non-readers, non-English speaking, and limited-English-speaking participants. Over 150 participants were served.

Substance Abuse and Gang Intervention Program (SAGIP), a traveling anti-drug/gang/AIDS display featuring SAM (Substance Abuse Mobile) II, funded by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, traveled to 101 sites, had 76,000 walk-through visitors, and impacted another 300,000 via TV and radio exposure.

Self-Destruct, an anti-gang and drug video, and the anti-drug comic book, **Mighty Medic**, featuring a Black superhero, funded by the U.S. Department of Education, have become very prominent components of the SAM II traveling display. Over 9,900 free copies have been distributed.

Training, Internship, Placement (TIP), funded by the San Bernardino County Private Industry Council (PIC), provides pre-employment skill training, paid internships and job placement for sixty 18-21 year old San Bernardino County, low-income residents.

The PAL Center has also been certified by the California State Department of Education as a dropout-recovery **SB65 Educational Clinic.**

Success Factors

Success can be attributed to a PAL Center staff that is culturally, ethnically, bilingually and socio-economically sensitive to the population served. Additionally, this community-based effort was supported by students from California State University, Southern Illinois University at March Air Force Base, and community volunteers.

Role-modeling is also a key component. Students are more effective when they feel a sense of belonging, whether in elementary, secondary, college, or community-based institutions.

CONCLUSION

The dropout rate continues to escalate and no one entity can effectively address all the factors that impact the problem. The pressing needs of our youth must supersede politics or individual

ideologies. There MUST be a collaborative effort by all concerned organizations, groups, and individuals. To this end, the PAL Center was organized, provided practical experiences in multi-cultural education, and has been an effective mechanism for dropout prevention.

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